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The Realities of Schooling: Overcoming Teacher Resistance to Global Education

Electronic TIP

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TEACHING as a career is open-ended in a way that many careers are not. Teacher educators warn their students against assuming that they will ever be “finished” preparing to be teachers. As Dewey (1904/1964) noted, what one must look for in a student teacher who is likely to be successful in the long run is not specific skill but, simply, evidence of the “power to go on growing.”

Attending staff development workshops, encountering new methods and materials, and adapting to various changes in curriculum, instruction, and even, occasionally, organizational structure are an integral part of any teacher’s professional life. Global education is rapidly becoming one of the challenging new directions encountered by both preservice and inservice teachers.

Our focus is on inservice rather than preservice teacher education. From 1985 to 1989, we worked with the faculties of 11 elementary and secondary schools as they struggled to introduce global perspectives into their teaching,¹ and we studied the process as it unfolded (Tye & Tye, 1992). As one might expect, some schools were more successful than others, but much was learned from all 11 schools about the dynamics of innovation, and about resistance to change as well.

We learned many lessons from this collaborative work with teachers. In this article, we focus on
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two such lessons: (a) the problem of how the *meanings* that different teachers attribute to “global education” affect their *behavior* in adapting to the change, and (b) the problem of competing demands on teachers’ time. In addressing each of these lessons, we describe the problem using illustrations from teachers and administrators with whom we worked. We close with ideas about how such problems can be dealt with during the course of collaboration.

Dealing With Conflicting Meanings

The conceptual framework we selected for our work with the 11 schools was symbolic interaction theory (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interaction differs from the other basic families of theories (in particular, structural-functionalism and conflict theory) in that it focuses primarily on individuals (rather than on groups) as they interact within the context of daily life. It is a flexible orientation, one that acknowledges that peoples’ interpretations of events and things are never static and predictable, but are constantly changing.

Application to Global Education

The basic premises of symbolic interaction theory can be exemplified in terms of the 11-school global education project. First, *human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them*. When we made our initial offer to provide resources for infusing global perspectives into the curriculum, we received a wide range of responses

from the teachers at each school. At South High School, one said, "This is too controversial, it'll never be accepted in this community and I wouldn't touch it with a 10-foot pole." But another at the very same school said, "This is just what our students need—it could be the key to defusing some of the tension between the ethnic groups on our campus." While to the first teacher the term global education was fraught with danger, for the second it meant something potentially positive and constructive. The latter teacher got involved with the project; the former teacher did not.

Second, *these meanings are derived from the social interactions a person has with other people.* Further conversations with the two teachers mentioned above revealed that the first teacher had been deeply involved with another, somewhat similar project some years before but had been "burned" by a negative community reaction. In fact, she had almost lost her job as a result. The experience had left her cautious and unwilling to risk any changes in her established curriculum. The second teacher, on the other hand, who was studying for his counselor's credential and had a good deal of contact with students outside the classroom, was less worried about community reaction and more concerned about what he perceived to be the needs of the students and the social climate of the campus.

Third, *these meanings are continually modified through an interpretive process.* As the years went by and we continued to work with teachers at South High School, no negative community reactions occurred. The first teacher never did participate in project activities, but by year 4 she was ready to admit that her perception of global education had changed. She had seen some of her colleagues supplementing their regular lessons with learning activities incorporating global perspectives and getting good results. She was aware that some of the teachers at South High were working on curriculum projects supported by small grants from the project. And she knew of several of her fellow teachers who had enjoyed attending Center for Human Interdependence (CHI) workshops. No longer did this teacher view global education as dangerous.

From Receptivity to Resistance

Even providing a definition of global education at the outset does not necessarily guarantee that ev-

eryone involved will embark upon the endeavor with the same "meanings" in their heads. And, since the meaning attributed to a thing or event determines one's behavior toward it, inevitably those responsible for coordinating a global education inservice effort will encounter a range of responses in any school faculty: from very receptive to very resistant. Global educators need to recognize that reluctant teachers may act that way for deeply felt and carefully thought-out reasons, and work to understand the assumptions that shape those attitudes. The following "engagement/resistance continuum," which grew out of our work in the 11 schools, may be helpful.

Those faculty members most willing to engage with global education were ones who were open to the ideas of the movement from the start. Many were already infusing their teaching with a global perspective—they integrated references to their own travels into their lessons, involved their students in exploring the connections between their neighborhood and the world, or built upon a daily current events focus, teaching their students to identify the location of those events on maps and globes in the room. Some greeted the project with "We've just been waiting for something like this." Such people, we found, were also open to exploring new ideas and were willing to put in extra time planning, teaching, and evaluating what they were doing. A significant group of individuals engaged with the global education project because it was a new idea and they either saw it as having potential to change curriculum and/or instructional practices in general, or they simply liked new things.

Another group of people who readily participated in the project were those who were interested in doing something about their school's need to develop better cross-cultural understanding among students and who saw a potential in global education for assisting with this goal. For example, these teachers were likely to choose ethnic heritage fairs, family tree lessons using a world map, and guest speakers from other cultures as class, or even school-wide, activities.

There were people who joined the project some time after it had been under way and who had waited because they were just not sure of exactly what they were supposed to do in their own teaching. Some of those who fit this description, but who ultimately did participate, did so after they observed early adopters in their teaching and/or after they began to examine specific lesson plans or materials brought to their

schools by project staff members. In this fairly large group were some teachers who had been involved with one or more of the many other innovative programs that come along quite frequently in American schooling and who had not had success because the particular innovation was not well thought out or lacked classroom specificity.

This group reminds us that we too easily label teachers who do not immediately accept proposed innovations as "resistant to change." Wanting to see how something works is not resistance. Looked at from one perspective, it is simply common sense. So-called change agents must be able to show how a new idea can be implemented in a particular classroom setting.

Initially, large numbers of teachers thought global education was something for the social studies classes or, in the case of primary teachers, for the upper grades. We continued to insist—and to demonstrate—that global perspectives can (and should) be taught in every subject and at every grade level. By using data from World Bank publications, the Population Reference Bureau, or the 1990 census, for instance, math teachers helped students to learn basic computation skills and, at the same time, something about the world in which they live. The daily newspaper frequently had material the science teachers could use to enrich their lessons in biology and chemistry. A global perspective is a natural in home economics (foods, clothing, and child care, for starters) and in English. In one high school, the entire English Department requested a small grant to purchase enough world maps for every English classroom! This made it easier for the English teachers to incorporate some geography into their world literature units. Eventually, we involved teachers of every subject area.

Another significant group is open to the idea of global education but reluctant to take it on because they perceive that they do not have the time it will take. Again, they are being realistic: It does take time. To begin with, teachers have to understand what a global perspective is. They need to learn about global issues. Then they need to experiment with ways to add a new perspective to what they already do. Often, adding a global perspective to a curriculum means learning how to teach differently: Cooperative learning, simulation, and community surveys are important pedagogical strategies. Those who are interested in convincing teachers to globalize their curricula must

be prepared to show how the time spent learning new content and new pedagogical techniques can make their work easier and more interesting.

A few faculty members were skeptical of global education because they were afraid community members would see it as un-American. Such people might, themselves, be open to the idea but are afraid of the reactions of others. In Orange County, California, where our project took place, there have been from time to time over the past 40 years attacks upon schools by various ultraconservative groups concerned with a variety of issues. For this reason, some of the network faculty members were understandably cautious. Those interested in involving school people in globalizing efforts must be able to demonstrate the need for the movement and its importance to America's future.

Implications for Collaboration

It is inappropriate to label people as resistant to change simply because they question global education (or any other innovation, for that matter). People often have good and legitimate questions about new programs. The change agent must find out what these questions are and what meanings are being attached to the new ideas. As Eichholz (1963) pointed out nearly 3 decades ago, once those meanings are understood, individualized strategies can be designed for working with those who question.

Dealing With Competing Demands

Initial responses to this project suggested that many teachers are quite receptive to new programs that they view as worthwhile. In school after school, the field notes reveal a good deal of initial interest, and in all the schools, some teachers, both individually and in groups, began to make plans for infusing global perspectives into their teaching. They identified themes on which they wanted to work and started to think concretely about the kinds of help they would need.

Other teachers held back a bit—we were told, in a variety of ways, that they were "waiting for the hook"—but when they realized that (in this project, at any rate) there was no hook, they too began to get involved. Every school already had some teachers who taught with a global perspective. For the majority, however, the necessary starting point involved obtaining information and forming an understanding of

global education as it might apply to their own daily classroom work. For the most part, this information-seeking stage could be accommodated without too much difficulty, primarily because it was something teachers initiated on their own, and at their own pace.

Planning Versus Doing

As teachers moved through this information-seeking stage and into the networking and implementation stages, though, they ran into trouble. The excitement of working on something they recognized as important for children, and the momentum generated by the sense of involvement with a task they had chosen for themselves—the “ownership” so crucial to teacher morale—came up against the overwhelming reality of competing demands. As long as the teachers were simply thinking and planning, things were fine; as soon as they tried to actually *do* something, pressures from every direction worked to thwart their efforts.

Page after page of our field notes contain apologies and perfectly valid reasons why teachers could not give the global education project the time they would have liked to give it. The teachers in these 11 schools worked tremendously hard, and did so with a generosity and cheerfulness that was remarkable. For the most part, teachers in all American schools perform willingly the tasks required of them, and many go further, voluntarily taking on additional duties. Even if they do not take on extra work, however, the tasks required of them have proliferated so dramatically in recent years that merely doing one’s job requires almost superhuman patience and endurance. Day-to-day life in most schools, for most teachers, is a grueling ordeal: too much to accomplish, for too many students, with too few resources, in too little time, and at too fast a pace. Listen to the voices of the teachers themselves:

There’s just too much to do in one conference period—I’ve got to run; can’t stay and look through the materials today—sorry!

I’m sorry to run in and out like this. There’s a parent waiting in my room, I’ve got an assignment to complete, and I’m already late for another meeting!

Don’t give up on us! This is a particularly hectic week. Everyone is still burned out from yesterday’s after-school SIP [School Improvement Program] meeting, which ran quite late.

Our new principal, like everyone else at this school, is finding that his attention is required in too many places at the same time. (Tye & Tye, 1992, pp. 110-111)

The demands competing for teachers’ time, attention, and energy are greater than can possibly be accommodated in the hours available. It proved all but impossible to schedule meetings at times when everyone who wanted to be there *could* be there, even when the group was just a small planning group:

In the second group, only two people came. Jack told us that there were two other events going on at the same time, and that the other four teachers we’d expected had to attend those. (Tye & Tye, 1992, p. 112)

Common planning time for teachers during the school day seems like a logical ingredient of school success, but historically it has not been considered important for teachers to have time for substantive professional communication as part of their job. The exigencies of scheduling in most secondary schools preclude common planning periods by department, and most elementary teachers do not have a break from teaching *at all* during the school day.

At both levels, teachers interested in working together on something are forced to try and meet before school or during lunchtime, and it is usually next to impossible to get the whole group together. This was true during the entire 4 years of the project, and did not change for the better even when a school’s commitment to global education intensified and more teachers became involved. Indeed, as more teachers got involved, it only compounded the problem, for all of the many other competing demands were still there, even if global education had moved up somewhat on the priority list.

Pressures From Every Direction

Pressures come from the state level (curriculum cycle, state testing, performance evaluation), the district (budget cutbacks, standardized treatment of schools, paperwork, other forms of accountability), and the school site (principals’ priorities, teacher-selected projects, the press of school problems). Teachers have to do a great many things they might not do if they had a choice, but it must also be acknowledged that they do some things because they want to. Many of the school projects and programs that were competing with global education for the time and attention of teachers had been willingly chosen by the teachers themselves.

I’m coaching the academic decathlon team, mentoring a first-year teacher, advising the yearbook and the National Honor Society, coaching tennis, and getting a master’s degree. I’m the union rep for this school, and I do my share of departmental curriculum work.

That's about all I can handle this year. (Tye & Tye, 1992, p. 124)

For many, the work on global education was a fairly high priority; for others, it was sort of a mid-range priority; and for some, it was not a priority at all. Other projects, roles, or responsibilities were more important to them. Part of our challenge was to convince such teachers that infusing some global perspectives into their teaching need not displace their other interests, but could in many cases enhance them.

And finally, there are the pressures teachers bring with them to school from their personal lives. Often, these are among what psychologists have recognized as life's most stressful events—the illness of a child, the death of a parent, marital problems, moving to a new home—but they can also be the normal daily aggravations and unexpected mini-crises that can be counted upon to interfere with what had been planned:

Linda flew through the library, stopping to tell us that her babysitter had gotten sick and that she was late to school because she'd had to take her daughter to another sitter. (Tye & Tye, 1992, p. 124)

The Resilience Hypothesis

Given the intensity of daily life in schools, how do teachers protect themselves from the barrage of perceived demands that press upon them from every direction? We observed six kinds of behavior that might be described as adaptive.³ Based upon our experience with these 11 schools, we hypothesize that the defense mechanism used by a critical mass of teachers at any given school has a direct relationship to the overall morale and resilience levels of that school. In other words, the way in which a significant number of the teachers deal with competing demands constitutes a major dimension of the climate (or culture) of that school.

If enough of the teachers feel burned out, their unhappiness will create a certain type of atmosphere. If many feel belligerent—undervalued, poorly treated by their district, taken advantage of—their active resistance will affect everyone. Teachers who feel that the problems of their school are overwhelming are unlikely to invest much time in trying to solve them; their defense mechanisms in the face of competing demands are more likely to be avoidance and resistance. If a significant proportion feel confident, competent, and self-sufficient, this too will create a characteristic environment; one that is adaptive and resilient. This is the kind of environment in which global education has a real chance of success.

Lessons Learned: Working With Teachers

In our work with this global educators project, we were aware of the impact of *evolving meaning* on teachers' attitudes and actions; and the impact of *competing demands* on their daily lives. In the light of these, the following approaches were found to be critical to the project's success.

First, as outsiders who wanted to work with teachers, we knew that our attitudes would be important. We wanted to work collaboratively, and to approach the teachers with what Goulet (1971) terms "active respect"—a determination to provide the help the teachers ask for, rather than what we think they need. As McDonald (1989) puts it,

Outsiders who have the right attitude play a role that is interpretive and catalytic, and they play it with patience. They help find answers but never provide them; they help shape outcomes but never determine them. Their efforts are powerful only insofar as they spur efforts by the true insiders—efforts that are necessarily tortuous and messy. (p. 207)

Second, while our presence in the schools would deliberately be low key and nondirective and there would be "no arm-twisting" to get involved with the global education project, we would make an effort to continually reach out to welcome everyone's involvement. We realized that if we were to reach our goal of diffusing global perspectives throughout a school, we could not afford to have the project come to be seen as belonging to only a certain few teachers. In our experience, this often happens with innovations, and it is deadly to attempts to achieve school-wide change.

Some of the uninvolved teachers feel left out and would like to be in, while others use the perception of clique ownership as a justification for their own non-participation. In either case, exclusivity can create tremendous barriers to the success of a project. If we also bear in mind that as the meaning of "global education" changes for people, they may want to become involved in implementation activities, and it is clearly vital that all members of a faculty feel that they can join when they choose to.

Finally, we didn't expect that the project would evolve in the same way at all 11 schools. We had no intention of imposing a single vision of what global education should look like, and every intention of nurturing whatever variety of interpretations would emerge. This was consistent with our belief in the single school site as the most effective locus of change,

and it meant that, throughout the 4 years of the project, we devoted a great deal of staff time to discussing the schools, one at a time, always seeking the key to what would work best at each site. Admittedly, things moved slowly. But this approach to inservice teacher education paid significant dividends in the long run, as the teachers felt they had been treated professionally at every stage of the project.

Conclusion

Introducing an innovation such as global education into schools is a complex process. Among the factors influencing this process are the meanings teachers attribute to the innovation and the problems of competing demands on teachers' time. With sensitivity to these issues, however, global education can be successfully integrated and teacher resistance to change can be overcome.

Notes

1. Two full-time and two part-time staff members of the Center for Human Interdependence (CHI) spent much time in each school, assisting teachers—both individually and in groups—to develop and field test lessons containing global perspectives. CHI provided day-long workshops periodically on specific topics of interest to the

teachers (e.g., the global environment; cross-cultural understanding; the global economy; folk arts and folk dance; dealing with controversy in the classroom), built a library of curriculum and reference materials, supported school-wide and between-school projects, and much more. See Tye and Tye (1992) for a detailed description of the project.

2. The six types of defense mechanisms or adaptive behavior we observed, ranging from dysfunctional to functional, were burnout, refusal, avoidance, withdrawal, negotiation, and selective participation. They are described in more detail in Tye and Tye (1992), pp. 125-127.

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